Sent by FAX

Date: August 14, 1996

To: Rita Dixon

From: John M. Buchanan

Subject: Reflections on visits to burned churches by representatives of the PC(USA) -- for the Racial Ethnic Porch.

On July 17, 1996, Clifton Kirkpatrick, Stated Clerk of the General Assembly, Curtis Kearns, Director, Division of National Ministries, Pamela Worthy, Administrative Assistant in the Division of National Ministries, and I were greeted in the Charlotte, North Carolina airport by James Thomas, Associate Executive of the Presbytery of Charlotte and traveled by van to the Matthews-Murkland Presbyterian Church, one of the church buildings recently destroyed in the series of church burnings.

Matthews-Murkland is a union of two congregations. At the time of the reunion, a new functional yellow brick building was built for the new congregation on the site of the old Murkland Church. The older sanctuary was retained for use by the congregation and it is the one that was burned. The Reverend Larry Hill met us at the site which is now a sad pile of charred timber. He showed us a picture of the building before the tragedy: a striking, handsome, white clapboard edifice with painted wood trim, a very beautiful church. The site is handsome and striking as well. The church stood on the knoll of a hill visible by automobile from both directions. The neighborhood itself is unique: African-American farm country until suburban Charlotte pushed its way out and the residents away. It is now a suburb of Charlotte.

Larry Hill escorted us into the building where we met with four of the members of his congregation. After showing us pictures and telling us about the older building, Hill described the fire itself and the amazing response of neighbors. People began immediately to come to the site, expressing grief and anger. White neighbors walked around the burned-out building, some weeping, several writing checks immediately for the rebuilding of the church. In addition, the congregation began to hear from people from all over the country. Larry told us about how the fire has brought the white and black communities together as nothing has in recent memory. The local Roman Catholic priest, local rabbi and several pastors of white churches have indicated their interest in establishing a relationship with the congregation. One Board of Deacons committed itself to worshipping with the congregation on a regular basis. One couple flew all the way from Germany, remembering a time in German history when places of worship were destroyed and burned, to express solidarity with the congregation.

The congregation of Matthews-Murkland is now discussing how to proceed. They are not certain they wish to replicate the old building but have a sense that God may be calling them to do something new and of service to the neighborhood. Their spirit is high and full of hope and even has a wonderful sense of humor. Larry and his members told us that at a recent meeting of the Evangelism Committee, someone suggested that the congregation should try to establish a higher profile in the neighborhood. "Apparently we have achieved that objective," he said, and we all laughed. Perhaps Presbyterian energy and generosity might resource a project to reflect the church's concern for racial justice and racial healing.

We walked around the burned remains one more time and asked Larry and his members to keep some of the burned wood for future use and they agreed.

Later we visited Memorial Presbyterian Church, Ed Newberry, Pastor, for a meeting of people from Charlotte Presbytery. The Clerk and I brought greetings from the General Assembly and we heard about efforts in the presbytery to further the cause of healing and reconciliation.

In Birmingham we were met by Eugenia Gamble, Associate Executive of the Presbytery of Sheppards and Lapsley, who escorted us to Bessimer, Alabama, for a meeting of the presbytery. We arrived just in time for a great lunch and a warm and enthusiastic reception.

Eugenia escorted us south of Birmingham to Greene County, site of three recent church burnings. Our first stop was at the Greene County Courthouse where we were met by the Chair of the County Commission who introduced us to other commissioners and county officials. We were joined by pastors of the three churches: the Reverend Levi Pickens, Mt. Zion Baptist Church, the Reverend Woodson Lewis, Little Zion Baptist Church, and the Reverend Arthur Coleman, Mt. Zoar Baptist Church. Reverend Lewis, who is 92 years old and still an active farmer, and who was quoted recently in <u>The New York Times</u>, saying, "When they're burning down churches, they're messin' with the wrong man," told us that he has not missed preaching on a Sunday for 79 years. Also present at the meeting were the coordinator of the Mennonite volunteer project and his counterpart from the Quakers. To our delight, we were joined also by three Presbyterian clergy from the San Francisco area who were leading a volunteer group to work on the building project. The Reverend Frank Jackson, Faith Presbyterian Church, Oakland, the Reverend Chandler Stokes, First Presbyterian Church, San Anselmo, and the Reverend Vincent Mok, Lafayette-Orinda Presbyterian Church. They seemed to be as happy to see us as we were to see them.

The county commissioners told us about the situation and how the county was responding in terms of police investigation, and also the rebuilding of the churches and the general spirit of the community. The sense of it was that the whole county, black and white, knows how important this event is in the life of the community.

The volunteer coordinator spoke movingly about how the fires have stimulated a very different mentality in an area that was hostile to civil rights efforts two decades ago.

We traveled to the church sites and observed the Mennonites in action, meeting their volunteers from Lancaster, Pennsylvania and other congregations. The Quakers, on the other hand, accept volunteers from ecumenical partners and service clubs. The new churches which are about 75% complete are neat, including sanctuary, baptismal font, small social hall/dining room, with several small Sunday school rooms and an office. When this process is completed, the congregations will have functional new buildings and a new vision for ministry and for their own future.

My sense is that all around this project there is energy building for some larger and deeper response to the racism and racial violence which has erupted in our culture. The dream of all of us is to help build a culture in which this sort of thing is unthinkable in the future and the daring to hope for a Presbyterian initiative on racism and reconciliation which might emerge from this tragedy.